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TOK Essay Guide

Multiple-user teacher edition

By Michael Dunn and Sue Bastian

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1. Introduction

- a. The authors
- b. Aims
- c. The TOK essay
- d. Assessment
- e. FAQs

a. The authors

Michael Dunn is the creator and director of the theoryofknowledge.net website, the world's most used online resource for TOK. He was educated in Cambridge and Edinburgh, and has taught in IB schools since 2001. His last position was TOK coordinator, head of film, and senior IB Diploma history teacher at Markham College, Lima. He has designed TOK resources for a variety of different organisations, including Cambridge University Press. He is based in Cambridge, UK.

Sue Bastian is widely regarded as one of the central architects of the theory of knowledge course. She has taught at the International School of Manila, and the United Nations International School in New York. She edited and co-wrote, *Theory of Knowledge for the IB Diploma* (Pearson, 2014), and helped design the IB online workshop *Helping Students Write Better TOK Essays and Assessing Their Work*. She is based in New York.

b. Aims

Teachers tell us that as much as they enjoy teaching theory of knowledge, the assessment side can be an anxious process. Even experienced teachers struggle to figure out how best to use the IB's subject guide and subject reports, the way to combine these with the growing number of textbooks from prestigious publishers written by experienced TOK practitioners, cope when the TOK program changes, or acclimatize to the often radically different way TOK is delivered when they move to a new school. Then there are the discussion forums on the Online Curriculum Centre (OCC), input from multiple workshops, TOK blogs, tweets and re-tweets and so forth. Sometimes more is less! What to do?

This Essay Guide provides you with what you need to know in the clearest and most economical way, so that you can do the best for your students, as well as gain fulfillment as a TOK teacher.

c. The TOK essay assessment task

The TOK Essay is written on one of six Prescribed Topics (PTs) issued by the IB. These PTs are posted on the OCC in September before the May exam session, and in March for the November exam session. The choice of the PT is left to the student.

The Teacher's Role – from the 2015 TOK subject guide

The teacher has three principal responsibilities:

- To encourage and support the student in writing the essay
- To provide the student with advice on the guidance about the skills needed to write the best essay possible
- To ensure that the essay is the student's own work

The completed essay of 1600 words (maximum) is uploaded by the school along with a (new) Planning and Progress form (PPF) recording three *interactions* between the teacher and student meant to strengthen the process of writing the essay and to “support authenticity.” These involve:

1. Initial discussion of titles and choice of the PT. The teacher should assist the student in developing their ideas about the essay.
2. Follow-up discussion. The student should present his or her ideas to the teacher, with the accompanying discussion designed to help the student create a written paragraph-by-paragraph plan.
3. Presentation of essay draft. At this stage, according to the *TOK Subject Guide* (p.53) “The teacher is permitted to provide written comments of a global nature, but is not permitted to mark or edit this draft.”

The student is allowed to ask for additional advice, about specific issues (such as the suitability of examples), although the teacher is not allowed to provide any further written support. The teacher should not mark the essay, or give a predicted grade until the essay has been uploaded.

Further advice to teachers appears in the twice-annual Subject Report on the OCC written by the Chief Examiner after the marking of each collection of May and November essays. Although it is not easy to identify if the general comments link to you or your students, it is a document well worth reading for its guidance.

But it should also be understood that the Subject Report, either by tradition or necessity, will *inevitably catalogue ways in which candidates' ideal experience with TOK can fall short*. Thus, you will find that whilst this report is impressively thorough, it is not meant to be a ‘to-do’ document as much as, in its early pages, what NOT to do.

From the 2014 TOK Subject Report (under Degree and quality of apparent teacher guidance)

- Some teachers are providing too much input, sometimes with counterproductive results
- Many teachers seem not to be providing any guidance to candidates at all
- The distinctive nature of the TOK essay requires carefully tailored support

This Essay Guide attempts to steer clear of the faults cited in the first two bullets above by offering you the carefully tailored support signaled in the third bullet.

d. Assessment

The essay is marked by an external examiner on a scale of 1-10 according to the criteria of the current assessment tool (rubric) found in the TOK Subject Guide on the OCC. This mark out of 10 is then doubled, added to the mark out of 10 for the presentation, then converted into a grade (A-E) and combined with the grade of the Extended Essay according to a chart found on the OCC and in the Appendix of this Guide. This final grade works itself into the calculation for the student's overall score required to receive the diploma certificate.

May 2015 is the first year that the new Global Impression Marking Rubric (GMI) will be used to score the TOK essays. All literature related to previous sessions should be ignored

The most recent IB handbook states that an 'E' grade in TOK results in a 'failing condition', with no diploma awarded. This can no longer be made up by the total number of points in other areas

Details regarding the integration of the TOK grade with that of the Extended Essay grade are not easy to grasp. As always your IB Coordinator should be current with such matters as found in the *Handbook of Procedures for the Diploma Programme*. Also, IB Answers is always available.

e. Frequently Asked Questions:

When does a school receive the grades or marks from the IB?

July for the May session; January for the November session.

What is the difference between a mark and a grade in TOK?

See page X above, but the most basic difference is that the mark is a number and the grade is a letter.

How can I explain to my students why TOK gets fewer marks than, say, Chemistry?

The Core Subjects—TOK, Extended Essay and CAS—are foundational and basic to the philosophy of the IB. Without completing the Core, none of the other subjects' scores, no matter how high, will count.

Do all the TOK Essays go to the same marker?

No, they are randomly assigned to the cohort of 300+ markers around the world most of them TOK teachers who read them electronically.

Are footnotes and bibliographies added in to the overall word count?

No.

What happens if the word count goes over 1,600?

The reader stops reading and there is a 1 point penalty.

Is there a standardized format for presenting the essay?

Yes, and why this is so often disregarded is a mystery when it is the easiest part of the assessment to get right!

What is the required format?

Double-spacing with a 12-point conventional font, say, Times New Roman or Helvetica. One-inch margins, no borders, no fancy cover sheets (In fact, no cover sheets at all). The PT is to be stated exactly as given from the IB and the word count should be noted. This is fairly straightforward yet the Subject Report complains year after year about those who fail to comply with the simplest of requests. We wonder why?

2. Preparing your students for the essay

- a. Resources
- b. The assessment tool
- c. Skills embedded in the rubric
- d. Encouraging analysis
- e. Forming arguments
- f. FAQs

a. Resources

Although it may have been in the back of your mind as you go through your teaching year, the stark realization of a deadline brings a sharper focus to what you need to do to prepare your students to write their papers. In addition to the **theoryofknowledge.net** website, one of your best resources is only a few clicks away on the OCC called **Teacher Support Material**. This site, like ours, will tell you that teachers need an essay prep plan just as much as students do.

The *TSM*, the *Subject Report*, *The Subject Guide*, perhaps a favorite textbook, a workshop or two, and **theoryofknowledge.net** together provide a rich library for creating an Essay Writing Plan for use in the classroom. Only you know your reality - your experience and expectations, the demands of your timetable, the motivation of your students - but our suggested plan below begins with a thorough understanding of the assessment to put you on the right road.

The IB offers both face-to-face and online PD workshops – see *Helping Your Students to Write Better Essays and Assessing their Work*

b. The assessment tool

This part of your plan should include:

- a. Familiarity with the assessment tool (rubric) including what Global Impression Marking (GIM) means (page 55 in the Subject Guide)
- b. Understanding the general question at the top of the rubric—*Does the student present an appropriate and cogent analysis of knowledge questions in discussing the title* - and the appraisal terms at the bottom
- c. Identifying the obvious and implicit skills the rubric asks of the writer
- d. Ensuring that your students understand how their essay will be evaluated

Global Impression Marking is the label given to the new approach to assessment that allows for a holistic judgment of the essay in combination with the descriptors for the two aspects of the rubric:

1. **Understanding Knowledge Questions**
2. **Analyzing Knowledge Questions.**

With this rubric you are asked to rely in part on your overall judgment about scoring once you have understood the criteria. This comprehensive approach is in contrast to the (overly) piecemeal method of recent years with its extensive checklist of required characteristics.

Judging the work as a whole helps answer the general question at the top of the rubric as well as reaching a decision when the paper seems to straddle two different bands or marking levels.

You are also given a set of adjectives below the criteria on the same page that examiners use to distinguish the five different marking levels. Although not yet tested for their value, perhaps these appraisal terms will lead to a vocabulary of like-mindedness as we move towards a common language. Students should be exposed to these terms as well when you give feedback and when they use them in peer review activities.

Is this new assessment tool perfect? Probably not. All examining institutions worry about their various metrics and constantly strive to make them better in terms of validity and reliability. Is it an improvement? Many think so. And trial runs have shown that there is much more consistency of marking with the GIM rubric than in previous exam sessions. We shall see what the 2015 Subject Report tells us.

Teachers and students may want to review the WOKs (language, reason, sense perception, emotion, imagination, intuition, memory, and faith), and discuss which are relevant to marking a TOK essay. For example, does the new holistic approach make use of intuition as a way of knowing?

c. Skills Embedded in the Rubric

Typographically, one of the features of the new rubric is that some terms are set out in **bold** or *italics* as explicit skills and abilities. The teacher should have these in mind throughout the teaching of the course. The list is fairly long but probably unsurprising.

- What is a knowledge question?
- What is a knowledge claim?
- What is an Area of Knowledge?
- What is a Way of Knowing?
- Familiarity with AOKs as shared knowledge
- The difference between personal and shared knowledge
- How AOKs and WOKs are related
- How WOKs are linked to personal knowledge and methodologies
- How to link KQs and KCs with the title
- How to deal with different perspectives
- What is an argument?
- How to construct an argument
- How to find RLS examples
- How to evaluate examples
- What is a counterclaim?
- How to draw an implication
- What is the difference between analysis and description?

Then, of course, there are the standard writing skills of clarity, coherence, depth and development. All in all, it is quite a prescription. Yet, don't forget that the GMI approach is not a checklist such that all items above need be touched on to the same degree.

But perhaps the central skills for the TOK essay are **analysis** and **argument**, features often missing from essays according to the Subject Report. Year after year the same refrain is heard - too many students do not go beyond the descriptive stage - which leaves them stuck in the lower levels of achievement.

From the Teacher Support Material:

Skills that students need to bring to the task of writing their essays are directly the teachers' responsibilities to develop over the course of the program

d. Encouraging analysis

The TOK essay is more than an opinion paper where the writer says: "This is what I think and here is why". The analysis begins with taking apart the PT right from the start to find the key ideas under the surface of the topic.

A detective who didn't probe, but who jumped to a conclusion in a flash, would probably be wrong nine times out of ten. The same goes for students when they face the list of PTs for the

first time before making their choice. Or even after they have made a choice and begin writing their essay. The mantra for the TOK student has to be from the first moment: **Think About It!**

In other words, you have to ask certain questions of the PT:

- Who would be saying this or asking this and why?
- What are the key words here - and what do they have to do with TOK and the different ways of knowing something?
- What areas of knowledge seem to be relevant to what the topic is about?
- What, in short, is the title or topic getting at?
- What are the Knowledge Questions that can be pulled out of the PT as building blocks for the essay?

An analysis shows not just what you think, but **how you think**. An analysis looks at things in detail and uncovers the hidden meanings and then works those into the writing of the paper. So, analysis doesn't stop with the PT; it goes on throughout the paper, especially as you begin to build your argument.

e. Forming arguments

If you could do a Wordle (word cloud) of the Subject Report you might find that *argument* would be the biggest word on the screen along with its synonym-cousins: *thesis*, *position*, *reasons*, *evidence* and *justification* and its twin *Knowledge Questions*. Moreover, the concept of **argument** - as central to one of the two Aspects of the rubric - should be a lodestar (def: a star that is used to guide your way as a model or inspiration) as they begin to compose their summative essay that will demonstrate their TOK thinking.

So, yes, a TOK essay is an opinion paper because it has a point of view, but it becomes more than that when you advance reasons for your opinion or thesis within the context of what others think. Students are fond of saying that we all have different ideas about things, so following that lead they should make these other ideas part of their essay to show that they understand the big picture not just their little piece of it. Once they understand what others might say who don't agree with them (a counterclaim), or who might have a slightly different take (or perspective) on things, then they can make their view all the stronger. And when they evaluate the views of different people compared to their own they show that they really know what they are talking about.

In real life outside the classroom people exchange views all the time - sometimes calmly, sometimes melodramatically - and offer arguments to get their point of view accepted. This is true in any field where people judge competing claims all the way from scientific propositions to theories of artistic excellence. Such dialogues are going on right now in every walk of life: in corporations, in government, on campus, in courtrooms, in tribal councils, and, hopefully, in the classroom. Perhaps, even, in your own family this very evening. That being said, there are many situations where diverse views are not welcome, but TOK is not one of those places.

Notice the rubric at Level 5, which says: “investigate different perspectives...” which, by implication, means an essay that does not take notice of other perspectives will not go beyond L 2 or 3

Knowledge is formed in this dialectic give and take as the history of any of the AOKs or disciplines will show. It has seldom been the case that knowledge was generated by someone saying something true and everyone else in the world falling into line without a murmur. So, it is a good idea to show by your own example in writing your essay that you understand that (at least) **shared knowledge** comes about through the dynamic of arguments drawn from diverse perspectives and supported by convincing and realistic examples.

Examples: Any argument or thesis—usually involving a general statement or knowledge claim—needs concrete examples to help people understand what you are talking about and to believe what you say. If you ever wonder what is the value of TOK, remember this: making yourself clear and persuading others is a life long skill of the utmost importance. Examples help, even though an example on its own is not a complete justification. To illustrate:

Knowledge claim/general statement: The vegan diet is the best way to a long and healthy life.

Example: the X tribe in Y land subsisting on a totally vegan diet have a life expectancy on average of well over ninety-nine years with little illness.

The general statement may or may not be true, but it is an interesting knowledge claim applying to millions of people including one’s self. There are many notions to be analyzed out of the thesis, but that is not the point for the moment. The example, whether true or false, is offered in support of the thesis and is concrete and does have interest for the reader who can identify with the fact. So together—the thesis and the example—help move the essay along. And note that the example is a RLS, not a hypothetical or manufactured one thought up to give the thesis some heft.

But supporting example are not enough. You have to think about contrary beliefs or differing statements and positions as well and explore or explain their relevance to your argument. In TOK, the idea of an alternate view is called a **counter claim** and appears for the first time in the rubric at Level 3 called Satisfactory, which means that if you omit the mention of counter claims or diverse perspectives you will not even reach that level.

g. Frequently asked questions

What should I do when most of my students are not writing in their first language?

This question is asked frequently by teachers working with multi-cultural students. There is no simple answer, but the language skills in TOK writing are meant to be “communicative” not ‘literary’. Also, many times the mother tongue students do not write better than their second language peers. (Teacher’s note to Self: the more writing the better.)

Are there skills that influence the marker that are not explicit in the rubric? There is an impressive IB internal check on such tendencies, but it is difficult to know even for oneself if *nuance*, *complexity* and *flair*, to name just three, have an influence.

What can I do to keep my students from seeing everything in black and white or either/or terms? One of the best pieces of advice is to ensure that you emphasize that knowledge, belief, conviction, certainty and so forth are held by degrees and can shift and change over time. This is true for shared as well as personal knowledge.

When the PT is a quote how much attention should the writer give to what the author of the quote meant? The student should not research its meaning or background, since the author’s name is there usually for the sake of intellectual honesty. Students should interpret the quote for its intrinsic meaning.

What is the exact meaning of PT? The Subject Report uses *Prescribed Title* as the official expansion of the abbreviation. Yet *Prescribe Topic* is sometimes found as is *the question*, *the topic*, *the subject* or *the prompt*. Whatever the term, within the TOK context, the PT is what the diploma candidate addresses in essay form as one of their summative activities. It is composed by the IB, written by the student, guided by the teacher and scored by the external IB examiner.

3. Planning the essay

- a. The essay writing pathway
- b. Selecting a PT
- c. Identifying knowledge questions
- d. First and second order KQs
- e. Putting this into context: identifying a knowledge question from a 2013 PT

a. The essay-writing pathway

That students should plan their essay is indisputable; **how** they should plan will vary. Some need to outline quite formally; for others this does not work; they need more of a mind map approach either with or without the aid of visual organizing software. Some students use oversized sketch pads to doodle and record their thoughts; another wrote cribbed little notes in vertical columns on note cards. Perhaps one of the strangest self-help techniques was a student jotting down ideas on tiny slips of paper - AOKs, WOKs, examples, perspectives, counter claims and most importantly knowledge questions - and pinning them to a corkboard to move around as his thoughts came together. The diversity of the IB population leads to any number of organization methods.

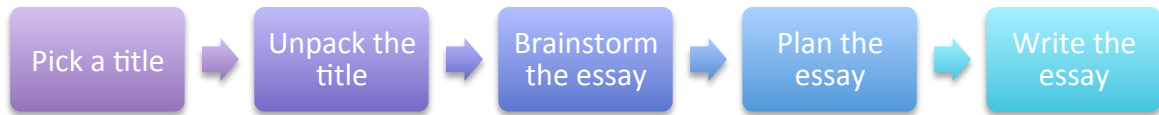
The first section of the PPF asks the teacher to record a discussion with the individual student about the selection of the essay title. The value of a one-to-one with a student is incomparable, but anecdotal evidence suggests that group stimulation can be equally beneficial.

Teacher from Southern Australia:

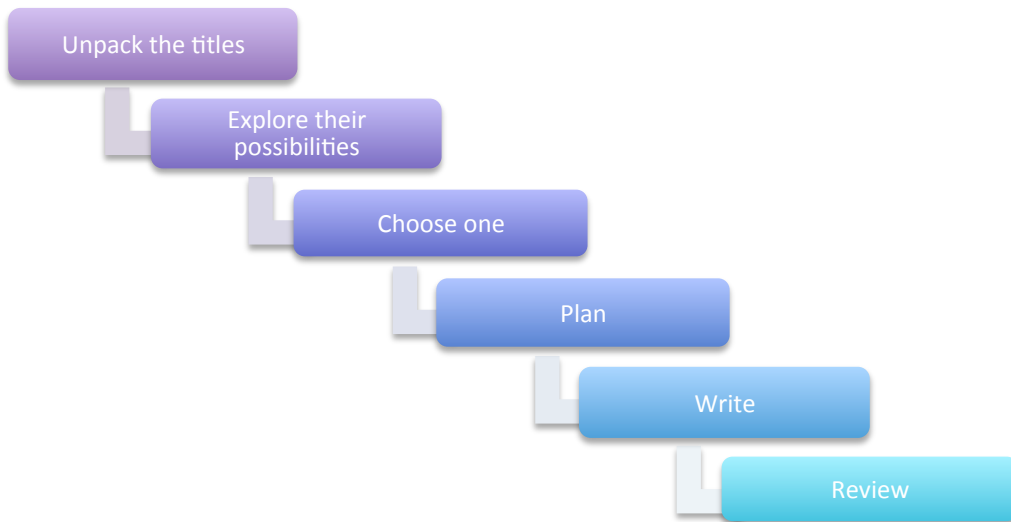
When I found my students response to the PTs flat last year, I realised that they were intimidated by the prospect of writing an essay on something where they really had to think, not just remember what they were taught. So I had them Tweet each other ideas back and forth on every PT, until they found a rhythm and a confidence. Best brainstorming idea I ever had.

Most material on how to write the essay suggests a sequence of something like the following:

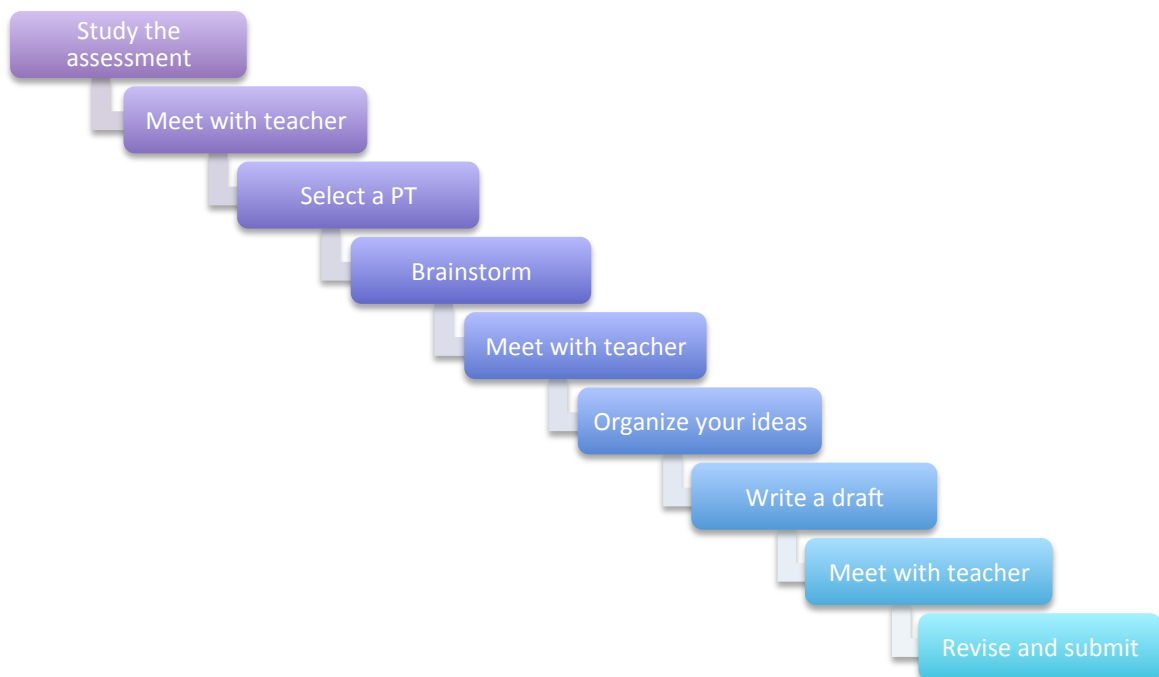
Pathway A



Pathway B



Pathway C



Whatever the appeal of one or the other, it's best to create some kind of pathway with signposts to track progress and set deadlines.

Starting with (c) above which incorporates the newly required PPF, having your students **become familiar with the assessment** is absolutely necessary, if they have not been writing and using it all the way thorough the course. Teachers have sent in the following to help with this process of familiarization:

1. **Make a streamlined checklist** of the key assessment terms and have students mark exemplar essays found on the OCC that have marks and commentaries by the examiners. Use this list only after reviewing the meaning of the terms.
2. This should not be new territory if you have been teaching all along with the vocabulary of TOK such as Knowledge Questions, Knowledge Claims, perspectives, counterclaims, Areas of Knowledge, Ways of Knowing, and so forth.
3. Students **identify one term** from the list that they think will be their biggest challenge, then meet with like-minded worriers and discuss strategies for overcoming this obstacle. Read another essay and concentrate almost totally on that one feature of the essay. You can't do everything at once!
4. **Select three TOK terms** and with three different colored markers
5. Colour-code the essay looking for, say, knowledge claims (blue), counterclaims (red), and examples (green) – we use this colour coding for our essay model in section 4.
6. Pass out the assessment tool and give students three minutes to study it, then ask for two volunteers to come up and **recite the rubric (roughly) from memory** in turns. If one of the players reaches an impasse another student comes forward, taps him on the shoulder and take his place until both Aspects have been covered. Don't forget the general question at the top!

b. Selecting a PT

Meeting with the teacher, selecting the PT and brainstorming seem not to have a clear-cut order in the preparation plan and the IB does not legislate how teachers conduct this part of their essay prep beyond what is asked for on the PPF. Whatever works is the way to go!

Straw votes in several workshops showed that many teachers prefer to talk about the PT list with the whole classroom early in the year so as not to spring a surprise on everyone at the last minute. Yet, others thought just the opposite. But where there was unanimity was the need to start early enough since the choice of a PT is not easy, meetings go on and on, and the writing always takes longer than anticipated.

Teacher from the West Coast, USA

I don't know which is worse – having a student paralyzed by indecision at the list, or having one grab a title and start in on a 'grip it and rip it' style of writing that leads to disaster. It's my job to set the tone and the pace in the right way at the right time. And that means giving ourselves a good head start.

Unpacking - whether before or after choosing a PT - is a word commonly used in the assessment literature. But whilst the inner circles of TOK use the term frequently, its meaning is far from universal. In brief, it seems as if the unpacking imperative is close to what is meant by an analysis that digs into the box, and finds out what is there and what needs special attention. Some teachers advise unpacking all PTs before a choice is made; others encourage the choice first, *then* the unpacking.

What the student goes through in selecting a title is not very different to what the teacher would experience when faced with the same task. So look at the list yourself and walk in the students' shoes. Chances are, the PTs are not equal in effect. A couple may stand out as possibilities, and the others will daze you. Some may appeal for a moment only, to fall by the wayside when you begin to think about them. Again, the magic word is **THINK** - the opposite of snap judgment!

Most people have bought something on impulse only to regret it later, so to reiterate what was said on page 11, ask the following:

- Who would be saying this or asking this and why?
- What are the key words here?
- And what does it have to do with TOK and the different ways of knowing something?
- What areas of knowledge seem to be relevant to what the topic is about?
- What, in short, is the title or topic getting at?
- What are the Knowledge Questions that can be pulled out of the PT as building blocks for the essay?"
- And, what's more, do I think I can show my best thinking with this title?

Brainstorming - thinking freely without hindrance - along with the surgical analytic way of addressing the PT - runs all the way through the selection stage. The student needs to toggle back and forth between the two as called for.

To think up an idea and then criticize it for worthiness is central to almost every knowledge-generating discipline (or AOK) known to scholarship, a WOK combining imagination and

reasoning at the very least. This means exploring one's own thinking about a PT beyond just "liking" it. The same goes, of course, with the writing of the essay.

A famous philosopher once remarked that there are two parts to any sentence or question: What is *said*, and what is *unsaid*.
Unpacking thoroughly means finding the unsaid, and becoming clear on what it means.

c. Identifying knowledge questions

The heart of Theory of Knowledge teaching and learning is made up of questions. Take away the interrogative and the course essentially disappears. Not only is this true of questioning as a method, but it is just as true of the backbone of the essay when structuring your paper in terms of the Knowledge Questions (KQs) that you extract from the Prescribed Title.

Students get confused about KQs because they think they are more than what they actually are. The concept is actually fairly simple: a knowledge question is exactly that – a question - or issue - about knowledge. Knowledge questions should be open questions, which means that they don't have obvious and clearly-defined answers, and can be interpreted differently depending on the perspective you view them from.

TOK has always been built around this concept, but the IB has never quite decided on the best name to give it. At various times during the last 20 years, 'knowledge questions' have been called:

- Implications of knowledge
- Knowledge controversies
- Knowledge issues

Seeing KQs as a combination of all these things is probably the best way to approach them.

Virtually everything has a KQ attached to it. The great thing about TOK is that it provides students (and teachers) with the language and framework to identify and express a KQ. This language and framework are the ways of knowing and areas of knowledge.

Let's put this all into context to make it a little clearer. If we pick a news story from random, we can then identify the knowledge issue inherent in it. At the time of writing this guide, commemorations are being held all over Europe to mark the 100th anniversary of the beginning of World War I, when the Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria was assassinated by a Serbia student, Gavrilo Princip. For most of Europe – particularly Austria – Princip was a terrorist,

whose actions helped to cause the worst conflict the world had ever seen up until that point. But in Serbia, statues have been erected in Princip's honour, and he is celebrated as a freedom fighter that tried to stop the aggressive expansion of Austrian power in Eastern Europe.

To identify the knowledge questions related to this real life situation, we first need to think about which areas of knowledge they are related to. Clearly, we're dealing with history here, and how people view the past. So this might give us:

Why do people have different views and opinions of the past?

This is certainly an open question, as there are many reasons why we view the past in different ways, one of which – nationality – is clearly relevant to this case. We might think also about the range of evidence drawn on by historians: leaving out one piece of evidence might give us a different picture about the past. We might also think about the way historians draw on other subjects to analyze the past. Perhaps they have a developed understanding of economics or psychology, and have insights that other historians have overlooked. The relative importance of these different answers will probably lead us to different answers. I might say that the nationality of the person studying the past is the most important factor in determining what they end up discovering. You might say that the evidence they use is the most important factor.

It's usually possible to identify more than one KQ, though. Another KQ related to this story might be:

To what extent do reason and emotion affect the way we understand the past?

This is still related to history, but it brings in the ways of knowing more explicitly. We might argue that historians have to rid themselves of emotion when they look at the past, and rely purely on evidence-based reason. But on the other hand, one of the critical skills of a historian is the ability to empathize with people from the past, which is related to emotion, in order to properly understand their motives for behaving in a particular way.

d. First and second-order KQs

There are two types of KQs that we deal with in TOK.

- First-order knowledge questions. These are *direct* questions about the world, linked to specific area of knowledge.
- Second-order knowledge questions. These are questions that are concerned with *how we acquire knowledge* about the world.

Although during the course you'll look at both these types of KQs with your students, in the essay their focus should be on second-order KQs. This is important to bear in mind, because it will help them to avoid going astray. If they hand in an essay that contains mostly first-order KQs, it will end up sounding more like an essay written on psychology, or mathematics, or the arts – rather than on TOK.

Again, putting this in context, let's look at the example we've used above. Our subject matter is the role of Gavrilo Princip in the start of the First World War. A first-order KQ might be:

Were Gavrilo Princip's actions the reason for the start of the First World War?

This is a very interesting question that would prompt us to look at the evidence for his actions starting the war, and the evidence for other factors causing the war. It's an open question. And it clearly deals with one of the areas of knowledge – history. But this is not a valid KQ for TOK, because it is a first-order KQ. To explore this question, we'd use historical methods, rather than thinking about the nature of knowledge itself. This would give us a history essay rather than a TOK essay.

On the other hand, the KQ that we have identified –

Why do people have different views and opinions of the past?

- is clearly a second-order KQ, as it is concerned with the different ways in which people acquire knowledge about history. In order to explore this knowledge question, we would consider much wider areas of knowledge than just history, and also look at the nature of knowledge itself.

Students confuse first and second order knowledge questions in many areas of knowledge. Mistakes in history are particularly prevalent, with students unable to distinguish between events from the past, and our *study* of events from the past. However, this can provide you with a good way of illustrating the difference between the two types of KQ.

e. Putting this into context: identifying knowledge questions from a 2013 PT

Experience says that showing rather than telling is the better way to become adroit with Knowledge Questions, so here is an example from the TOK Subject Report for the May 2013 exam session. PT 4 was the following:

The possession of knowledge carries an ethical responsibility. Evaluate this claim.

If the PT were written as “Does the possession of knowledge carry an ethical responsibility?” it is a fair guess that the reflex of some readers would be a quick yes or no, such is our habit. But the learner is asked for an evaluation of a knowledge claim, which is something quite different

The Ideal Thinker might say right off in a kind of stream of consciousness -

“Okay, this is clearly a hypothetical ‘If...then’ claim... If A, then B... What do I think about this?... Just intuitively... But wait... I don’t even really know what it means... but I kind of do agree, because my personal knowledge reminds me of the time I heard about the guy who was going to blow up an airplane... and his brother felt he should be stopped once he found out about his plans... but, he couldn’t make up his mind at first... and this was a real life conflict... but then again, I remember thinking about those guys researching the bomb at Los Alamos during WWII and most of them were in the knowledge for knowledge’ sake mode... and that kind of appealed to me... Those scientists didn’t really know that what they were working on would be used to blow people up... Or did they...or should they have known?... So let me think this through.”

And in thinking it through the Ideal Thinker begins to ask questions of the PT among which could be something like those paraphrased from the TOK Subject Report on pages 14 and 15.

- Is it ever possible to maintain a neutral relationship with what is under investigation?
- Is there any knowledge completely independent of ethical responsibilities?
- How do we know that our knowledge is trustworthy?

The KQs above are only a partial list of what a creative unpacking of the PT can produce. Below is a longer list of possibilities that students might discuss while keeping in mind their relevance to the PT, their potential for generating examples from diverse perspectives as well as shared and personal knowledge, their link to two or more Areas of Knowledge and Ways of Knowing, and their likelihood of forming the best structure for your argument. Not all KQs are created equal!

- What does it mean to say the truth will set you free?
- Is knowledge for knowledge’s sake a defensible position?
- Could the judgment be different within different ethical systems?
- Can what is right be known?
- Do the ends ever justify the means?
- Is there a responsibility to seek or acquire knowledge?
- What are the dangers of self-deception and prejudice in making moral judgements?
- How are moral dilemmas resolved?
- Is there a hierarchy of knowledge with ethical knowledge superseding other knowledge?
- Does ethical knowledge necessarily involve action?

4. Writing the essay

- a. Framing knowledge questions – claims & counterclaims
- b. Exploring claims and counterclaims
- c. Drawing on personal and shared knowledge
- d. Evidence to avoid: hypothetical, anecdotal, clichéd examples

a. Framing knowledge questions – claims & counterclaims

The way to set up a discussion and justification of KQs is by splitting them up into knowledge claims and counterclaims. The knowledge claim proposes the knowledge question, and the counterclaim opposes the knowledge question, much in the same way as a debate is run.

The reason why KQ exploration should be set up in this way is because the IB Diploma in general, and TOK in particular, is all about being open to other ideas and considering different viewpoints, as much as it is about forming and offering opinions of their own. TOK essays need to reflect this.

One of the key aims of the IB, listed in the Learner Profile, is to encourage ‘open-mindedness’ in students. By considering alternative viewpoints (ie counterclaims), students will demonstrate that they possess it.

Putting all of this into context, we can look at one of the PTs from May 2014:

6. “A sceptic is someone who questions any knowledge claim, and demands clear definitions, consistent reason, and sufficient evidence” (taken from Paul Kurtz, 1994). Explore this approach in relation to two areas of knowledge.

The question asks students to pick their own two areas of knowledge, so let’s thinking about the natural sciences and history. The statement in the title refers to the sceptical method (which it helpfully defines for us – this made it a very good PT to choose), and asks us to evaluate this approach. This might lead us to this KQ:

How effective is the skeptical method in providing us with knowledge about the natural sciences?

Rather than state this as a question, though, you would need to present your knowledge question initially as a 'knowledge claim' – acting, as we have said, as a way of 'proposing' the KQ.

The skeptical method is a very effective way of acquiring knowledge in the natural sciences.

To avoid contradicting ourselves later on in the essay, though (because, of course, we're also going to consider the counterclaim), let's alter this so it's more open-minded:

In some ways, the skeptical method is a very effective way of acquiring knowledge in the natural sciences.

Now you are ready to discuss your knowledge claim, by offering your own thoughts, opinions, and arguments. We'll expand on this in part 'c'.

Your counterclaim is simply the alternative position to the knowledge claim you have offered. So for the one above, the counterclaim might be:

However, the skeptical method can sometimes hinder us from gaining knowledge about the natural sciences.

It's good practice to include a linking phrase or sentence to distinguish it from what you have just been discussing. These could include the following:

- While others may think...
- Contrary to popular opinion...
- Although traditionally it is believed...
- Despite what is believed...
- Although it may be true that...
- On the other hand...
- A different view suggests...
- However, it might be the case that...
- I would like to point out what is overlooked...
- Could it be the case that...
- Most people assume the opposite, but...
- These reasons point to the conclusion that...

b. Exploring claims and counterclaims

Obviously, the discussion of the claims and counterclaims will depend on the PT that has been chosen, and the KQs identified. But as a rule of thumb, students should be aiming to do as many of the following as possible:

- Explaining what the claim/counterclaim means
- Saying how it relates to the prescribed title
- Thinking about it in the context of the areas of knowledge and ways of knowing

- Giving their own opinions and ideas

For our example, the discussion for the knowledge claim might include the following:

In some ways, the skeptical method is a very effective way of acquiring knowledge in the natural sciences. Definitions need to be given clearly so that they can be understood and agreed upon by everyone involved in a particular scientific field. Given that the laws of nature behave in a consistent way means that we also have to apply our logic in a similar way in order to understand them. And perhaps most importantly of all, hypotheses (and later theories) all rely on providing sufficient evidence in order to support them. If any of these elements are absent, then the resulting knowledge may be undermined.

For the counterclaim, we could have:

However, the skeptical method can sometimes hinder us from gaining knowledge about the natural sciences. This is particularly the case in the early stages of the scientific method where scientists often rely on their intuition or even accidental discoveries in order to come up with a hypothesis worthy of investigation. If every idea at this stage required justification, then certain hunches may not have been fully explored; in addition, whilst it's true that the laws of nature are generally understood to behave uniformly, the other tenet of the natural sciences is that knowledge is only ever provisional. In other words, we could close ourselves off from acquisition of further knowledge if we assume that everything behaves according to the logic that we have always followed.

Note that the discussion would almost certainly have to be more extensive than this, but for the sake of clarity and simplicity, we'll keep our model concise.

c. Drawing on personal and shared knowledge

The subject guide states that although the TOK essay is not *primarily* a research paper, "it is expected that specific sources will be used." This means that examiners will generally expect to see examples drawn from sources other than the standard textbooks.

Students must justify what they have said in their discussion with evidence, and this evidence should be taken from real life. It comes in two forms:

- Personal knowledge. This is knowledge they have experienced or created first hand, such as events they have been a part of, things they have witnessed, emotions they have felt, and learning experiences they have built up.
- Shared knowledge. This is knowledge that comes from second hand experiences, gained from a variety of sources, such as news reports (TV, printed news, etc.), documentary films, books, the internet, and so on.

For personal knowledge, they could think about what they're focusing on for their extended essay, and how it has developed their knowledge of a subject; or about CAS experiences, and how they have introduced them to different perspectives; they could draw on significant moments in their study of other subjects. They can also draw on their experiences outside of a learning environment (for example, works of art they've seen or read; how they've been affected by science; ethical decisions that they've had to make), but they should be careful not to present these examples in an anecdotal way – see below for what we mean by that.

They should also draw on shared knowledge as well. This will not only add authority to what they are saying (assuming they are reliable sources – newspapers and media sites range hugely in terms of objectivity), but it will also allow them to consider different perspectives. The more examples they can give, the stronger their argument will be, and the more they will demonstrate their engagement with a topic, and their commitment to fully exploring it.

To put this into the context of the example we're using, they might justify the discussion they've already presented in the following way:

In some ways, the skeptical method is a very effective way of acquiring knowledge in the natural sciences. Definitions need to be given clearly so that they can be understood and agreed upon by everyone involved in a particular scientific field. Given that the laws of nature behave in a consistent way means that we also have to apply our logic in a similar way in order to understand them. And perhaps most importantly of all, hypotheses (and later theories) all rely on providing sufficient evidence in order to support them. If any of these elements are absent, then the resulting knowledge may be undermined. My own experiences as a Group 4 learner supports this idea. In biology we are encouraged to be as clear as possible in how we state our hypotheses before experiments, and we go through the same procedure in order to investigate them. On a research project I was involved in on *Drosophila*, we also had to base all of our assertions on carefully observed evidence, which we then had to replicate in order to prove what we had stated. Such an approach can be seen in virtually every major scientific breakthrough, such as the discovery of DNA, which progressed through various different stages, each one characterised by an insistence on the sceptical method. If at any point during the process – such as proposing the helical structure of DNA, applying strict mathematical logic to the helix transform, and relying on experiments that provided clear empirical evidence, such as the work of Rosalind Franklin on X-Ray diffraction - the discovery may not have been made.

For the counterclaim:

However, the skeptical method may sometimes limit us from gaining knowledge about the natural sciences. This is particularly the case in the early stages of the scientific method where scientists often rely on their intuition or even accidental discoveries in order to come up with a hypothesis worthy of investigation. If every idea at this stage required justification, then certain hunches may not have been fully explored; in addition, whilst it's true that the laws of nature are generally understood to behave uniformly, the other tenet of the natural sciences is that knowledge is only ever provisional. In other words, we could close ourselves off from acquisition of further knowledge if we assume that everything behaves according to the logic that we have always followed. As William Dewey put it, "The important thing to realize is that the conjuring up of the idea is not a deliberate, voluntary act. It is something that happens to us rather than something we do." This can be seen clearly in the discoveries made by Max Planck and Albert Einstein, both of whom stressed the importance of the role of intuition and imagination. Their discoveries led on to the development of quantum mechanics, which forces us to completely re-evaluate our concepts of logic and rationalism within physics, and have an open mind to forces that operate in a (as yet) completely unpredictable way. Discoveries such as Teflon, Viagra, and Penicillin show the truth of Pasteur's adage that "chance favours the prepared mind", as well as suggesting that approaching science in an overly skeptical and methodical way – allowing nothing to chance - isn't always the most effective way of acquiring scientific knowledge.

d. Evidence to avoid

We've drawn on a nice mixture of evidence above, from personal learning experiences, to the ideas of important scientists and thinkers, and actual real life examples. But it's easy to draw on invalid evidence that may not support their KQ discussion, and could even undermine it. Three of the most common types of evidence are listed below.

i. Hypothetical examples

Hypothetical examples are credible but imaginary situation that we make up in order to illustrate a point. Although they can be of use when trying informally to explain something, and may be based on completely reasonable scenarios, they are not valid within a TOK essay, or even during a debate or discussion in class. The reason for this is that they do not provide evidence that has actually happened, and tend to lead on to generalizations.

Because they are generally based on familiar assertions or scenarios, it's sometimes tricky to distinguish hypothetical examples from real ones. Think about the American historian who is writing about the US, and is therefore biased; the doctor who knows her patient is dying, but decides that it is ethically justified to lie to them; the scientist who decides to fake the evidence in order to support his hypothesis. Are these hypothetical or real life examples? Perhaps they *may* have happened, but unless you can put a date and a place on them, and say when, where, and to whom they happened, they're hypothetical. Your students should stick to **real life** examples – even though they're harder to find.

ii. Anecdotal examples

They should also be very careful to avoid anecdotal and informal personal experiences. Stories about relationships with boyfriends and girlfriends are shaky at best; tales involving sport and parties and alcohol are similarly unconvincing and tiresome.

Even more than with hypothetical examples, it's difficult to identify what is and what is not anecdotal. To some degree, you can apply the same approach as you do with hypothetical ones: anecdotal examples are often hazy in terms of place, time, and detail, so any example that is characterized thus should be avoided. Anecdotal examples are also ones that students use their memory alone to draw on, and do not necessitate any further research or thought. Again, these should be avoided – memory, as we know from TOK, is often very unreliable! Finally, anecdotal examples often don't lead on to particularly convincing implications. They are trivial in nature, and don't tell us much about the nature of knowledge.

Instead, ensure that your students stick to specific, solid personal knowledge to avoid presenting anecdotes, specifically, as mentioned above, their experiences as a learner such as challenges they've had with their extended essay, intellectual clashes they've had with classmates and teachers, difficulties that they've overcome in their Diploma courses. Another way to avoid veering into anecdote is for them to keep their examples contemporary: stories that take them back to elementary school are dubious in accuracy, and lack immediacy. They need to be precise about what they're saying, and, as much as possible, try to fix their experiences with a place and date to make them more convincing.

iii. Clichéd examples

The TOK essay needs to be original and compelling, and demonstrate an individual approach, rather than just “repeating commonplace cases or sources” (as the IB put it themselves). This means, as much as possible, drawing on real life situations that other people have not used.

These following examples are just a few of the most common ones found in TOK essays, and should be avoided if at all possible:

- Citing Hitler and the Nazis as the archetypal example of a society gone wrong
- Using the heliocentric versus geocentric theories as an example of a paradigm shift in thinking
- Drawing on Darwin's theory of evolution to show how scientific knowledge progresses
- Stating that Columbus proved that the earth wasn't flat (this isn't true anyway!), and using it as another paradigm shift
- Using $1 + 1$ as an example of a flawless mathematical axiom

Encourage your students to be original! They shouldn't recycle examples used in textbooks. They need to find their own examples, which should be up-to-date, well understood, and relevant. And make sure they use as many personal examples as possible – this is the best way to ensure that their examples won't be the same as other candidates.

5. Pulling it all together

- a. Making links
- b. What are 'different perspectives'?
- c. Applying different perspectives
- d. How do you include a consideration of implications?
- e. Making sure the essay is coherent

a. Making links

One of the ways in which students will be assessed in the first criterion is the extent to which they have effectively linked the areas of knowledge and/or ways of knowing. This means bringing into their arguments references to other parts of the course, and comparing and contrasting them to the one they are focusing on. Most PTs require them to focus on at least two ways of knowing or areas of knowledge, so they should be linking these two; making more links than this will certainly take them even further.

Linking different parts of the course means to approach the different ways of knowing and areas of knowledge in a comparative way, so that they can identify their similarities and the differences. Given that you can never properly consider the ways of knowing and areas of knowledge independently (when we talk about emotion, we inevitably think about reason; when we refer to religion, we have to consider faith; when we're considering the natural sciences, we compare them to the human sciences; and so on), this should come quite naturally.

The rule of thumb in this respect is: don't hold back. All the PTs encourage discussion of the different parts of the course in unison. Although this session's prescribed titles are incredibly open in terms of what they ask students to focus on, they still need to refer to different aspects of the course, and compare and contrast their relationship with knowledge.

Students should try to mention other ways of knowing and area of knowledge at the beginning of their knowledge claim discussion. This only has to take the form of a passing reference. This works best when they have moved onto their second area of knowledge, so they can refer back to ideas they have already offered. In our example, let's say that we're going to talk about history alongside the natural sciences. Our knowledge claim for history might be similar to the one for natural sciences, so:

The skeptical method can be a very helpful method of acquiring knowledge about history.

To link it to the natural sciences, we might expand this to:

The skeptical method plays just as important a role in history as it does in the natural sciences. All historical assertions require adequate evidence; historical definitions must be provided just as clearly as natural science ones; and in the same way as there are natural laws which must be approached logically, so there are patterns in history that have to be approached with consistent reason.

This links both areas of knowledge, and by referring to what we've just been looking at. We're also adding continuity and coherence.

We can do the same for the counterclaim, taking it from:

On the other hand, the skeptical method can also create problems for us as we try to acquire historical knowledge.

...to:

On the other hand, similarly to the natural sciences, the skeptical method can also create problems for us as we try to acquire historical knowledge. Like scientists, historians require working hypotheses, which may be based on intuition and hunches. And although these require investigation based on consistent logic, new historical insights may only be arrived at after looking at a problem in history in a new way.

b. What are 'different perspectives'?

The IB in general, and TOK in particular, place massive importance on considering different perspectives. Get your students to look at the TOK diagram, and try to recall what was said about the significance of the '/s' after 'knower': we don't just think about how knowledge related to *me*, we think about how knowledge is related to *all* knowers.

This means considering different perspectives, which again sounds more complicated than it is. Basically, it means they should simply try to consider how those looking from a different perspective might view the KQs in their essay. By 'perspective', we don't just mean a different opinion (that's what *they'll* be doing when they include their counterclaim) we mean something more fundamental. This could include the following:

- Gender
- Geographical location
- Religion/philosophical position
- Historical era
- Language
- Cultural tradition
- Socio-economic position
- Educational system
- Profession or career

c. Applying different perspectives

It's worth putting this immediately into context. Another previous PT asked:

Referring to two areas of knowledge explore how shared knowledge can influence our personal knowledge.

If we fix this question on, say, indigenous knowledge systems, we arrive promptly at the KQ:

How can an understanding of indigenous knowledge systems affect our personal knowledge?

Which perspectives might lend themselves to a discussion of this KQ? An initial encounter with IKS may lead us to think that the customs and traditions of certain indigenous societies are rather strange and illogical. But on further study, it's highly possible that we may end up concluding that they have a lot to teach us – for example, in terms of their relationship with the environment. This could easily impact on our own outlook, and encourage us to adapt our behaviour towards the natural world. Clearly, this would involve us considering (and adopting) different cultural perspectives.

Question 3 from May 2015 asked:

“There is no reason why we cannot link facts and theories across disciplines and create a common groundwork of explanation.” To what extent do you agree with this statement?

If we chose to look at human sciences and history, our knowledge question may be:

How do the human sciences inform our study of history?

Applying the perspective of time, we might think about how academic history is now a much more multi-discipline subject than before. For example, we draw on psychology more than we ever did, to provide us with an insight into what motivated people from the past to make the decisions they did.

Let's return again to the example that we have used, this time adding a difference perspective to our knowledge claim. This is shown in orange below.

However, the skeptical method may sometimes limit us from gaining knowledge about the natural sciences. This is particularly the case in the early stages of the scientific method where scientists often rely on their intuition or even accidental discoveries in order to come up with a hypothesis worthy of investigation. If every idea at this stage required justification, then certain hunches may not have been fully explored; in addition, whilst it's true that the laws of nature are generally understood to behave uniformly, the other tenet of the natural sciences is that knowledge is only ever provisional. In other words, we could close ourselves off from acquisition of further knowledge if we assume that everything behaves according to the logic that we have always followed. As William Dewey put it, “The important thing to realize is that the conjuring up of the idea is not a deliberate, voluntary act. It is something that happens to us rather than something we do.” This can be seen clearly in the discoveries made by Max Planck and Albert Einstein, both of whom stressed the importance of the role of intuition and imagination. Their discoveries led on to the development of quantum mechanics, which forces us to completely re-evaluate our concepts of logic and rationalism within physics, and have an open mind to forces that

operate in a (as yet) completely unpredictable way. Discoveries such as Teflon, Viagra, and Penicillin show the truth of Pasteur's adage that "chance favours the prepared mind", as well as suggesting that approaching science in an overly skeptical and methodical way – allowing nothing to chance - isn't always the most effective way of acquiring scientific knowledge. In addition, some cultural and philosophical traditions do not employ skepticism in the same way to understand the natural world. Native Americans stress the idea of forming emotional and even linguistic bonds with fauna and flora in order to understand them, a method that hardly stands up to skeptical scrutiny, but which is found in virtually all indigenous societies. Chief Dan George of the Tsleil-Waututh Nation believed that "if you don't talk to the animals, they won't talk back to you, then you won't understand." Given the profound relationship that indigenous peoples have with the natural world, it's hard to argue that we can't learn something from their approach.

Adding this perspective also has the benefit of bringing in more ways of knowledge and areas of knowledge.

d. How do you include a consideration of implications?

Integral to a good mark in the second criterion is a consideration of the implications of the essay's arguments. What this means is that not only should your students' KQs be meaningful and important, and their real life situations significant, they should also be explicit about why this is the case.

If they've chosen appropriate KQs, this should follow naturally. As we have seen, KQs should be big, open questions, and big open questions are generally significant ones. But they need to make sure they emphasize their significance, and demonstrate their awareness of this.

To put this in context, look at the text in purple, indicating implications:

However, the skeptical method may sometimes limit us from gaining knowledge about the natural sciences. This is particularly the case in the early stages of the scientific method where scientists often rely on their intuition or even accidental discoveries in order to come up with a hypothesis worthy of investigation. If every idea at this stage required justification, then certain hunches may not have been fully explored; in addition, whilst it's true that the laws of nature are generally understood to behave uniformly, the other tenet of the natural sciences is that knowledge is only ever provisional. In other words, we could close ourselves off from acquisition of further knowledge if we assume that everything behaves according to the logic that we have always followed. As William Dewey put it, "The important thing to realize is that the conjuring up of the idea is not a deliberate, voluntary act. It is something that happens to us rather than something we do." This can be seen clearly in the discoveries made by Max Planck and Albert Einstein, both of whom stressed the importance of the role of intuition and imagination. Their discoveries led on to the development of quantum mechanics, which forces us to completely re-evaluate our concepts of logic and rationalism within physics, and have an open mind to forces that operate in a (as yet) completely unpredictable way. Discoveries such as Teflon, Viagra,

and Penicillin show the truth of Pasteur's adage that "chance favours the prepared mind", as well as suggesting that approaching science in an overly skeptical and methodical way – allowing nothing to chance - isn't always the most effective way of acquiring scientific knowledge. In addition, some cultural and philosophical traditions do not employ skepticism in the same way to understand the natural world. Native Americans stress the idea of forming emotional and even linguistic bonds with fauna and flora in order to understand them, a method that hardly stands up to skeptical scrutiny, but which is found in virtually all indigenous societies. Chief Dan George of the Tsleil-Waututh Nation believed that "if you don't talk to the animals, they won't talk back to you, then you won't understand." Given the profound relationship that indigenous peoples have with the natural world, it's hard to argue that we can't learn something from their approach. Western lack of empathy with the environment (in favour of a more sceptical approach to knowledge), is detrimental to how we care for the natural world, and looking around at how much damage being done, perhaps this approach, which is common to virtually all indigenous societies, provides us with a very useful insight into improving the state of the planet.

Note that we have linked the implications of this KQ to the way it may be viewed from different perspectives. This is often an effective way to approach implications.

g. Making sure the essay is coherent

One characteristic all good essays should have – including TOK essays - is continuity and coherence. This means ensuring that all the sections 'flow' together, build on each other's ideas, and relate to the prescribed title.

- **Relevancy:** Every paragraph your students write should relate to the question. As they are writing – and when they read back their essay after they have written it – they should ask themselves 'does this directly address the question?' If they have to think too hard about this, then the chances are that it does not do so sufficiently.
- **Linking sentences:** A simple way to ensure that their essay 'flows' is to include linking sentences and phrases. These begin a new section by acknowledging what they have just written, either in terms of building on what has just been said, or presenting a point of view that may be different. The simplest examples include things like: 'in addition,' 'furthermore', 'having said that', 'on the other hand'. More of these are mentioned elsewhere in the guide.
- **Making links:** We have already dealt with this, but it's worth emphasizing that by comparing and contrasting the different ways of knowing and areas of knowledge, and other elements of TOK, your students will be going a long way to ensuring continuity and coherence in their essays.
- **Proofreading:** It's vital for students to properly proofread their essays. They should do this themselves after they have completely finished the last version (proofreading can't be done as they go along, as the process of editing constantly changes the sense of what they're writing).

If you have any remaining questions about the essay after reading this guide, please consult the theoryofknowledge.net website, or email us at info@theoryofknowledge.net

6. Latest thoughts on TOK essay writing

- a. Possible sources for outside real life situations
- b. General comments on the May 2016 prescribed essay titles
- c. Examiners' gripes and groans – what to avoid!

a. Possible sources of outside real life situations

In this chapter, we offer some general thoughts on the prescribed titles for May 2016, and also present some thoughts based on the most recent examiners' report for TOK (from May 2015). After extensive consultation, we are no longer offering specific guidance for the different prescribed titles, so we encourage teachers to spend time digesting the titles, and to run structured brainstorming with their students so that they can make an informed choice about which one best suits them, and how to approach it.

Students should find their own RLSs, although the following resources may be utilised for the essay, presentation, and the TOK classroom, to enable them to support their ideas and arguments with contemporary events and issues. In addition, the teacher should advise on the suitability of examples, and how well they work alongside knowledge claims and counterclaims.



theoryofknowledge.net Facebook page

Almost-daily links to compelling real life situations, accompanied by a suggested (loose) knowledge question. (access at facebook.com/theoryofknowledge.net)



theoryofknowledge.net Twitter page

The same information as found on Facebook, for those who prefer to get their social media fix from Twitter. (access at [@TOKsupport](https://twitter.com/TOKsupport))



theoryofknowledge.net Scoop.It page

The same information as found on Facebook, designed for those who don't have/prefer not to access Facebook or Twitter. (access at scoop.it/t/areas-of-knowledge)



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15 RLSs, first and second order KQs, talking points for each RLS, tips on the essay and presentation, a focus on an AOK/WOK, video link of a key thinker, and quotes and key TOK vocabulary. (Subscribe at the **Resources Shop**)

b. General comments on the May 2016 prescribed essay titles

There is a positive consensus amongst educators about the prescribed titles for May 2016. In general, they allow students flexibility, but also provide enough guidance so that students won't get lost, as they are designing, researching, and writing their essays. The vocabulary used within the titles is clear, and (for the most part), not too abstract. So with a little support, students should be able to understand what is expected of them in most, if not all, of the PTs.

We encourage teachers to run a two-step Q&A session with their students at the beginning of the essay writing session. The first of these will allow students to make a more informed choice about which essay to choose, and the second will get them started in terms of planning and researching their piece of work.

Step 1

- What are the key terms that need pinning down in this essay?
- What are the challenges and difficulties of this essay?

After students have gone through each essay in this way, they can think about the following interlinking questions:

Step 2

- Which areas of knowledge and ways of knowing will you focus on?
- Which knowledge questions (broken down into claims and counterclaims) will form the basis of your essay?
- What real life situations will you draw on to support your claims and counterclaims?
- How will you interlink the different parts of your essay?

c. Examiners' gripes and groans – what to avoid!

Many TOK essays still contain predictable and highly avoidable problems that are repeated year after year. The IBO publishes examiner reports after every session in order to address these, and the following ideas are based on the one for TOK. All quotes, unless otherwise stated, come from the May 2015 subject reports guide, published by the International Baccalaureate Organization. This is essential reading for all TOK teachers.

Issue 1: a lack of reflection

Examiners have noted that many TOK essays do not contain a sufficient level of reflection. This means, essentially, offering personal thoughts and opinions, and demonstrating engagement with the claims, arguments, and examples included within the essay.

The essay is a summative assessment of two years of hard but hopefully rewarding work within TOK. Students need to show evidence that they have been involved in this, and that they have related their own experiences to discussions and debates in TOK. One

way of doing this is ensuring that they have included strong personal real life situations, but this is not, by any means, the only way: thinking critically about examples chosen, weighing up and comparing different approaches to knowledge acquisition, showing awareness that there other perspectives in addition to one's own - these are all valid ways of personalizing an essay, and demonstrating reflection.

Issue 2: knowledge questions not presented effectively

Examiners have identified many problems with the way knowledge questions are dealt with in essays. They are often presented in a rather contrived and artificial way, and are sometimes not closely enough related to the title. Some candidates have also been guilty of merely listing a cluster of KQs in the introduction to their essay, and leaving them undeveloped later on in the essay.

The IBO say that knowledge questions should act as “stepping stones” for the exploration of ideas, and should “arise naturally” during analysis. Students should also be very clear that the prescribed title is the starting point for the essay, not their first knowledge question: many essays begin by identifying a KQ, then taking that, and not the title, as the place to begin their analysis. This can (and does) lead essays off on a slightly different path to the one intended by the PT, and present argument and analysis that do not fully deal with the question.

Issue 3: arguments not developed in an open way

Many candidates respond too rigidly to the command terms within the titles, particularly in terms of the openness of their responses to assertions stated in the PT.

The openness of responses is not determined by the way in which the question is worded, it is determined by the range of valid answers that are possible. In other words, just because a title may have a clearly defined question that seems to lead onto a ‘yes’/ ‘no’ answer, rather than beginning ‘to what extent...’, it does not necessarily mean that it requires a less wide-ranging response.

Issue 4: generalizations and misunderstandings about the nature of AOKs

Many essays still contain too many generalizations, and often have fundamental misunderstandings about the ways of knowing and areas of knowledge.

Certain ways of knowing are often linked to areas of knowledge in a knee-jerk fashion (reason is offered as the pre-requisite way of acquiring scientific knowledge; emotion for artistic knowledge; etc.), and some areas of knowledge are misunderstood entirely. History is singled out in particular, with candidates still confusing it with the past. As we are clear in the theoryofknowledge.net website, history is the study of the past, not the past itself, and ‘proper’ history is written only by historians, not journalists or politicians. Bias should not be assumed, particularly nationalist bias: just because a history book has been written in Japan it certainly does not mean it will inevitably be biased against the actions of China, and vice versa. In addition, ethics is often approached as a part of

other areas of knowledge (particularly religion), rather than an area of knowledge in its own right.

Issue 5: a lack of originality and personal experiences

Many candidates are still drawing on a rather limited range of examples, and are not drawing on their own learning experiences or cultural perspectives, in order to provide a rich enough range of real life situations. Originality and freshness should be key components of the examples used to support arguments, as should engagement (see the first point, above). Students should choose RLSs not just because of their suitability, but also the extent to which they have been engaged by them, and help them to advance their own thoughts and musings on the issue they are exploring.

Issue 6: The nature of knowledge viewed too narrowly

Students are often interpreting knowledge a very narrow way, beginning their essays with a definition of knowledge (most commonly, ‘knowledge is justified true belief’), and then offering an essay that follows its lead from this.

Examiners have commented that given the heterogeneous nature of knowledge (and the areas of knowledge) this is detrimental to the creation of an open essay. Trying to enclose knowledge within a definition takes TOK essays in the opposite direction to the one they should be going in, and actually makes it hard to consider the nature of knowledge in many aspects of the course. In addition, the tendency of students to apply dictionary definitions to words within the prescribed title suggests a rather mechanical approach to essay writing, and is often completely unnecessary – their own interpretations are just as valid, and indicate more engagement with the prescribed title. In general, essays should not base their discussions on semantics and (as the IBO puts it) “definitional squabbles”.

Issue 7: problems with the way the essay is crafted and presented

There are problems with many essays in terms of how they are finished off and presented. These include:

- Essays that lack proofreading, or have had too much of it: see the earlier section of this guide for what teachers are and aren’t able to do in terms of support.
- Essays exceeding 1600 words. There should be no excuse for this. The word count should also be inputted when the essay is uploaded.
- Too few paragraphs, as well as a lack of continuity between the paragraphs.
- Essays not double-spaced, or written with a size 12 standard font (Times New Roman, Calibri, and Arial are the suggested fonts).

- Essays without the prescribed title at the beginning. Not only is this good practice, it can even help to keep students on task. Students must also ensure to write the title correctly and in full.
- All claims in the essay that are not the students' own need to be cited on the page, and linked to references at the end of the essay. By not following this rule, many essays are not fully meeting the academic honesty requirement.
- Some essays rely substantially on teachers' notes, which jeopardizes students' ability to prove their own thinking. This should be treated with caution.
- Essays should never seek to place analysis and argument within the footnotes of their essay as a way to avoid being hindered by the word count. This is absolutely forbidden.